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## How to Be the Best at Everything: The Gendering and Embodiment of Girl/Boy Advice

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## Introduction

Stroll through any children's bookstore and brace yourself for an in your face gender divide. A quick glance at the shelves is a step back in time with a slightly modern twist: Dick and Jane (Gray and Arbuthnot, 1946) make way for opposing girl/boy advice books on *How be the Best at Everything* (2007). Targeting nine to twelve year olds, the books are pocket size and color coded, blue for boys, red for the girls. Imprinted on hardback bindings are 1950s action images: a muscled -boy with cropped black hair and swimsuit, cannonballing into water, and a small-wasted girl donned in winter cap, gloves, and full skirt, ice-skating. As child advice, the genre is pervasive. Alongside the *Best at Everything* books is the *Dangerous Book for Boys* (Iggulden, 2007) and *Daring Book for Girls* (Buchanan and Peskowitz, 2007), each with glittery, nostalgic font that squares children into prefabricated boxes where boy/girl embodiment supersedes masculine and feminine preferences. Spiraling out of these titles are expanding volumes including *For Boys Only: The Biggest, Baddest Book Ever*, (Aaronson and Newquist, 2007), *The Double Daring Book for Girls* (Buchanan and Peskowitz 2009), and more recently, *The Dangerous Book of Heroes* (Iggulden and Iggulden, 2010), and girl/boy versions of *Even More Ways to be the Best at Everything* (2008). It's a modern-day resurgence of the 1970 graphic, *I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl!* (Darrow, 1970), with white and middle class jumping off the covers. But hold on one second: the 1950s and 60s are so over. And isn't childhood a free space where kids can explore and "try on" different identities (Lipkin, 2009)? So why this decidedly boy/girl divide packaged under bookish advice, and why the equally gendered blue/red dangerous/daring sex and class divisions? Postmodern and materialist feminist thought as a lens into media-infused reproduction of person and place provide useful frameworks in interrogating these gender divide questions common to the *How to be the Best*

*at Everything* (2007) collection. This theoretical reading of ostensibly innocuous child play considers how segments of these seemingly tongue and cheek books also shortsightedly regulate boy as male and girl as female roles.

### **Theoretical Context**

What are the rules that govern girl/boy conventions? de Beauvoir (1989) theorized that one is not born woman; rather, she becomes this through a social gendering process. Butler (1997, 1993, 1990) postmodernizes this becoming prospect deeming sex in male/female as discrete from gender in masculine/feminine with each singularly and recurrently scripted by society. This script deeply roots the social fabric of everyday life beginning at birth, where blue/pink color code girl/boy, to primary school, where lining-up persists as a girl/boy division, to play, where delineated girl/boy toys mimic heteronormative adult roles, to popular media, which packages and reproduces what is habitually proscribed for boy as male and girl as female consumption (Peril, 2002; Zeisler, 2008). Over time this girl/boy binary has arched into a fluid sex and gender identity spectrum. Yet even as sex and gender categories have unequivocally evolved, they have similarly retracted, particularly on a sexuality bent where society tags departure from heteronormative rules as socially deviant (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Essentially, as the dynamics of identity become increasingly complex, the more conventional thinkers roadblock this gender bending diversity (Valenti, 2009). This roadblock response has likeness to an information overload reaction where paralysis displaces progression. I theoretically coin this “gender retraction,” a tactical back-step of sorts where, in the face of an expanding array of socially inscribed possibilities of identity, the binary clarity of an age-old boy/girl divide holds resurging appeal. Reliable and known, this boy/girl dichotomy counters ambiguity common to sex/gender fluidity. Gender retraction seems most prominent in conservative circles

overshadowed by economic and political uncertainty where opportunities to create oneself become a reach back for boy/girl stability that, despite its gender-marked limitations, carries historical rectitude. (Valenti, 2009). This gender regression tendency, a hallmark to patriarchal fidelity, closely mirrors Faludi's (1991) backlash against feminism, only here we see feminist antagonism overlay formative identity. As social construction of modern girls and boys, the *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books operationalize this gender retraction phenomenon.

Dangerous although hardly daring, the *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books evoke an era of 1950s complacency where supposed heteronormative simplicity rules. Girls play with dolls and grow up to like boys; boys play with trucks and grow up to want girls. Fast forward to adult moms and dads patenting 2.5 kids in suburban settings where twin beds and marvelous kitchen appliances morph sex and gender realities (Peril, 2002). It's a white middle class utopia where baseball and hop scotch meet rosy cheeks and apple pie. Part nostalgia in one breath and part sexual repression in another, the pages promise the wholesome American family perfection conceived in the 1952 television classic, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (Weisblat, 2010). Jump into 2011 and the activity dimension to these companion books effectually reproduce 1950s societal boundaries constructed around girl/boy embodiment and the interests and ability that compartmentalize each. Despite some evenhanded content sketched as clean-cut fun, this harmonized girl /boy taxonomy largely retracts present-day sex and gender latitude. Postmodern feminist thought sanctions such gender-bending freedoms.

Taking ground in the 1980s, postmodern feminism opposes essentialism. It draws on postmodern theory, which recognizes authority and knowledge from static and evolving sites of resistance, and post-structuralist theory, which positions culture and meaning as inevitably linked (Butler, 1990). In contrast to women-centered early feminisms, postmodernism dissolves a

sex/gender duality into situationally performative subjects (Butler, 1997, 1993, 1990; Foucault 1984). Here, identity is fluid and broadly conceived, from the traditional girl/boy slant to the more progressive feminine man to masculine woman to an expanse of nonconventional permutations performed differently in shifting social localities and stations (Butler, 1997; Warnke, 2011). Variance is the one constant where sex and gendered subjects, as both docile and dynamic, resist systems of power playing on the body (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1984). Colliding with this sex and gender fragmentation, the *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books fashion a nostalgic girl/boy world that distracts us from revisionist challenges to female subjectivity and male dominance (Bordo, 1999; Richards, 2003). As an evocative look back to one dimensional girl/boy actors, the *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) collection markets gender retraction in a way that empowers heteropatriarchy and smacks down postmodern feminist variations (Valenti, 2009). Media, as a capitalist breeder of popular culture, is paramount to this gender retraction equation.

Douglas (2010) argues that we must disrupt media ploys that sell an “all is right with the world” view, a condition the *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books cleverly stage in a gender retraction style. Gender equality is pervasive to this repeated messaging despite lived disparities in female to male wages and career ladders with further race and ability differentials (Guerrero, 2003). And this messaging is loud and sexually suggestive (Jhally, 2011). We frequently see girl power produced in a slick popular culture frame where tight fitting clothes and hair and makeup products accentuate embodied girl actors performing hyper-sexed girl roles (Levy, 2005; Nayak and Kehily, 2008; Zeisler, 2008). Boys similarly fall victim to power infused messaging linked to male beer-drinking, football-playing, truck-driving masculinity (Douglas, 2010; Nayak and Kehily 2008; Zeisler, 2008). Heterosexuality is the expected norm

and hyped up sexuality is the target outcome. Both sides of the coin reinforce a girl/boy binary that leaves little wiggle room for sex and gender deviations. And these messages are tough to evade be it catchy advertisements that spam your email, flashy tabloids that frame your supermarket checkout aisles, or jazzed-up commercials that intersect your television viewing. This social production of identity engenders heteropatriarchal dominance in who buys what sells. Capitalism fuels this media-based social reproduction equation and it does so through rose-colored lenses that falsely depict sex and gender equality (Douglas 2010; McRobbie, 2009). Class and ability are afterthoughts, narrow slices of who mirrors the deceptively swell upper crust of what media captures as a site of girl/boy popular culture. Materialist feminist thinking teases this social location out best.

Materialist feminist theory, an offshoot to Marxist feminist thought, roots women's oppression in the economic landscape of work (Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997; Tong, 2009). In a Marxist theoretical vein, we are what we produce (Gimenez 1989). The materialist turn introduces reproduction of people into this labor schematic, punctuating women's private work function as a site of historico-political oppression (Gimenez, 1978; Kuhn and Wolpe, 1978). As a capitalist system of production then, media reproduces sex and gender in packaging then selling a girl/boy tiered-hegemony that commodifies conventional sex and gender categories (Douglas, 2003, 2010; Oppliger, 2008). Borrowing Jaggar's (1983) thinking here, capitalism creates class-based oppressions, patriarchy exacerbates this for women. Race, class, and ability further stratify these interlocking oppressions, thereby signifying who has power and associated capital and who does not (Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997). In a market driven context, and as an extension of patriarchal agency, the intersecting variables of identity and place circle back around to influence media's target product: female objectification, sold to its target audience:

male consumption (Guerrero, 2003). This further complicates a sexualized double standard that remains contested even in feminist camps where respective pro vs. anti-pornography thinkers debate women's sex-work as profit-driven autonomy over patriarchal exploitation (Rubin, 1998; Dines, 2010; Dworkin, 1979; MacKinnon, 1989). Scrutinized forward, men as producers of person-used products and women as producers of persons who consume these products, expose the origins to the capitalist-driven male gaze/female pose dichotomy (Delphy, 1984, 1975; Jaggar, 1983). This sex-based owner/ laborer alienation, read in a materialist–feminist framework, helps us see how media infused popular culture, whether it is television, internet, or sexual industry, cultivates a largely white, wealth-class, sex-typed, able-bodied, male-centered hierarchy of power, all variables the *How to be the Best at Everything* books (2007) manufacture in a stylized, sexually-polarized, gender retraction mode of production.

Using these theoretical underpinnings to postmodern and materialist feminist thinking along with media as a site that performs identity, let's take a closer look inside the *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) companion books. While the Dangerous and Daring (2007) series expand the genre, as a concentrated lens, I focus my critique on the original girl/boy *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) content, which, for the purposes of this analysis, captures gender retraction most overtly. The two books address three broad categories of socialized identities: appearance, behavior, and future goals. Put on your gendered caps and get ready for an eerie stroll through a largely white, binary, able-bodied girl/boy extravaganza.

### **How Do I Look?**

Open to the table of contents on the pocket-sized, *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) companion books and find, “How to Explain Why you are Late for School” and “How to Look the Best in Photos” as first two entries for girls. “How to Make an Ollie” and “How to Fly

a Helicopter” are the first two entries for boys. Look a little further and find “How to Race Stick Boats” and “How to Rip a Phone Book in Half” as advice for boys and “How to Make sure your Sneakers Smell Really Good” and “How to be a Natural Beauty” as advice for girls.” These examples only break the surface for what are clear and divided boy versus girl stereotypes. And on the appearance end of things, girls win. Besides “How to Look the Best in Photos,” and “How to be a Natural Beauty,” girls are instructed on “How to Give Yourself the Perfect Manicure,” and “How to Make a French Braid.” Girls owning femininity wins some applause and similar cheer for braid and manicure agency. Still, coifing merit aside, these categories set up the male gaze before girls even know what the gaze is (Douglas, 2010, 2003; Oppliger, 2008; Valenti, 2009). While appearance is woven into many of the skills that the girl’s book imparts, on the boy side, action is the most common variable. Rather than how to look the best in photos, the boy version instructs on, “how to *take* the best photo.” There’s no posing here, just a reposing of girls who are already instructed on how best to work that pose: “*turn your body slightly to the side*”... “this captures the best profile” -- and: “*push your tongue against the back of your top teeth*”...- “this will make your smile gentle and easy to maintain.” This might be good advice for *TLC’s Toddlers in Tiaras* (Discovery Channel), but sadly -- whether indoctrinated for bad TV or real life -- the message is: girls perform the body; boys produce and capture the stare (Douglas, 2010, 2003; Nayak and Kehily, 2008; Oppliger 2008).

This gendering of male action to female accommodation not only sets girls up to serve male expectations, but in a gender retraction context, it limits both girls and boys in ways that prevent them from otherwise imagining and inventing their own I can be anything identities. With over 75 entries in the boy’s book of *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007), none offer advice on how boys should look; in the girl’s version, physical appearance matters. Add onto this



gendered veneer a decided racial and ability slant -- diagrams in both boy and girl books depict thin, white, able-bodied children enacting white lives -- and real-life diversity in person and place is erased in a pocket-sized version of one-sided perfection. Granted, there are a slew of dubious books on the market -- the advice genre in and of itself is meritoriously questionable -- but the pervasiveness of these books is the weighty piece here. They are popular, mainstream, and replicated in several different frames of reference, most recently, the engendering of parenthood in “How to be the Best Mom” and “How to be the Best Dad.” It’s the chicken-soup of advice caught in the vortex of a one dimensional modern American family. But it is the kid versions of advice -- boys and girls who are becoming -- that make these books high stake. On this bend, the *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books manufacture gender retraction in an action-based narrative which tightly casts boy as masculine and girl as feminine roles.

### **I Can Do It**

Achieving the best at everything requires a little manipulation for girls and a take action stance for boys. Here, girls are instructed on “how to make their sneakers smell really good,” advice that reinforces the neat and pretty of appearance, and correspondingly, inverts the physical and active that goes into smelling up those very sneakers. On the boy’s side, the closest parallel for good smelling sneakers is advice on “how to warm up your feet,” implying that boy’s feet can sweat and smell bad -- albeit thawed from the rough and tumble of outdoor life -- whereas girl’s feet athleticized must be converted back to sweet smelling symbols of beauty. The gendering here continues. For girls, there’s “How to Travel with One Bag,” girls learn how packing light appears “*glamorous*” and “*sleek*,” “How to Act Like a Celebrity,” girls learn how to perform like a “*hot Alister*,” which involves always looking “*immaculately*

*groomed even if just going to the supermarket;*” and “How to Make Sense while Talking Nonsense,” suggesting clever ways girls can use oxymorons. For boys there’s “How to Fight off a Crocodile,” superfluous advice for girls who are busy perfuming their sneakers; “How to be a VIP,” boys learn how to greet strangers who look impressive versus perform their looks; and “How to Keep People in Suspense,” guiding boys on how to craft the best “cliffhangers” versus ways to contrive ambiguous language. Add into this gendered landscape boy advice on how to “escape quicksand” or girl advice on how to “tightrope across Niagara Falls” and super kid powers abound. There’s evident parody between the lines here with boy crocodile fighting and girl word plays, and appreciably, some conspicuous gender breaches as girls -- from object to actor -- tightrope across Niagara Falls. Still, even with these more forgiving gender caricatures and transgressions, as a larger overlay, the action side of boy advice and the manipulation side of girl advice establishes an unequal platform for girl/boy expectations that reproduces embodiment of male strength and female poise (Douglas, 2010; McRobbie, 2009; Zeisler, 2008). Exceptions to this girl/boy corporeal binary are few but important to note.

Boys “escaping quicksand” and girls crossing “Niagara Falls on a tightrope” evidence the satirical thread of how to be the best at everything, and on this end, advice privileges girls similar to boys. There’s a collection of hyperboles that fall under this more forgiving gender rubric including “How to Cope if Zombies Attack” and “How to Survive in the Desert” as examples on the girl side; and “How to Survive in Space” and “How to Avoid Being Eaten by a Bear” as examples on the boy side. Although less gendered, the exaggeration margin to boy advice slightly trumps the girl counterpart in ways that capture what is frequently tagged to masculine adventure. Girl advice on how to groom horses or care for chicks versus advice on how to fight off wild animals brings this home best. Countering the more grandiose in counsel,

there are several reality-based entries that could be either girl or boy that float above the gender divide, such as “How to do a So duko Puzzle,” “How to use Chopsticks,” “How to Predict the Weather,” and “How to Beat a Drum” for girls; and “How to Perform a Card Trick,” “How to Eat in a Fancy Restaurant,” “How to do a Bunny Hop,” and “How to Ride a Unicycle” for boys. These entries teeter between the gender androgyny of food- etiquette and unicycle-riding on one end to the gender bending of girl-drumming and boy-bunny- hopping on the other. But any gender bending pretty much stops there, smacking up against the reproduction of traditional girl/boy attributes. Athletics is prime breeding ground here.

A right arm to reality, sports bifurcate boys and girls, both at the participation and spectator levels, and the *How Best at Everything* (2007) books cleverly authenticate this gender schism. How to take a penalty kick, climb a rope, take a jump shot, and dribble a basketball are owned by boys; how to ice skate, do a split, be a prima ballerina, and do a handstand are owned by girls. This is a gender divide not all that surprising: these activities are well-ingrained in ideological notions and structural systems that dictate conventional girl/boy expectations. Interestingly, the girl book includes instruction on how to make a jump shot, but this entry is disguised under “*How to Make a Basket*,” hiding girl hoopsters as a contrived rather than overt activity. With even less gender leeway on the boy side, *The How to Be The Best at Everything* (2007) books effectually determine and brand embodied sex and gender partitions. Sadly, this tiered matrix where boys monopolize football and team sports and girls monopolize dancing and gymnastics does little to alter the rigidity and out-dated wisdom that lead to this uneven distribution of gender capital in the first place. Further, the binary of feminine tagged to dance and masculine tagged to athletics misappropriates equally outdated behaviors where boys hold the corner on rugged and hard and girls hold the corner on soft and sinuous (Douglas, 2003,

2010.) Delicate girl dancers or strapping boy ballplayers are not inherently bad per say; rather, it is the binary curb of activities marketed to girls and boys where the gender-sidedness -- and the associated gendered inhibitions -- become wrongly ascribed. A case in point: advancing to post-binary may indeed foray us back in part to what we know as conventional girls/boy identities. This is the postmodern dominance/ resistance discourse in action (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1984). Despite this progressive digression, splintering the narrow mold overlaying gendered bodies fractures a girl/boy status quo faulty in opportunity and limiting in promise (Butler, 1997). This fracturing, even if complicated by the resurgence of prevailing girl/boy feminine/masculine roles, permits the production of de-essentialized gender prototypes enacted under more fluid rules. Disappointedly, in writing what girls and boys can become, the *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books elude this post-binary prospect.

### **When I Grow Up I**

Children imagine themselves as adults and fashion this forward reach on what they see and know around them. Sadly, as real life conversion, the *How to Be the Best at Everything* (2007) books engender a progressively uneven girl/boy slope. For boys, the final piece of advice garnered in *How to Be the Best at Everything* (2007) is, “How to be the Best all Around the World,” with instruction on how to say “*I’m the Best*” in seventeen different languages. The girl’s book concludes with “How to Cope if Zombies Attack.” This is reality juxtaposed against fantasy, and in this context, the reality discourse sanctions boys whereas the fantasy discourse sanctions girls. Although the flight of overcoming a zombie attack does destabilize objectified girl stereotypes, the illustration that accompanies this advice depicts two white, blonde-headed girls running from an eerily-clad but life-like figure, a chase-being-chased rendering all too familiar on the girl side of the fence. The fun in this -- zombies are dead and can’t hurt you --

falls on good-old fashioned child imagination; the harm in this -- despite dead zombies who can't hurt you -- is that the entry reproduces in its final message -- a fleeing narrative few girls would aspire to in arriving at a best at everything finish. Sandwich this girl sketch between more neutral entries accompanied by a more diverse graphic -- or invert it -- the girls chase the zombie -- and my critique here loses some oomph. Or modulate the final boy piece of advice from worldly self-inflation to comparable monster-like action and the granular of my gender rebuke begins to dissolve. Unfortunately, instead of freeing this potential, the boy book ends on a grandiose global note of reality that reinforces the masculine upper hand in a public sphere that systematically ensconces boys as leaders and girls as runners-up.

This is 2011, but movement along the gender equality spectrum is more a protracted line rather than the rising curve constructed in a subject-free postmodern fashion (Butler, 1997). As storybook relic from days past, *"I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl!"* (Darrow, 1970) captions dated wisdom where a little girl, white and able-bodied, is a "graceful" homemaker who "cleans," "cooks," and needs things "fixed," and a little boy, again white and able-bodied, is a "strong" home builder who gets "messy," "eats," and "fixes" things. As the story unravels, the boy grows up to be a "doctor" or a "president;" the girl grows up to be the doctor's "nurse" or the president's "first-lady" (Darrow, 1970). The *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books revise this 1970s gender discourse, but the revision merely transitions a divisive forty year-old girl/boy graphic to a divisive 2010 girl/boy dogma. Looking back to, *I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl!* (Darrow, 1970) reminds us of how blatant gendering was just decades ago. The *How to be Best at Everything* (2007) books, although more graduated in context and repertoire, inform us of how prevalent contemporary gendering still is. Scrutinizing my own gender retraction thinking, just maybe this textual deconstruction over interrogates sex-typed

bodies, complicating what is ostensibly a harmless collection of child play. But I quickly retract this latitude. Despite portions of tongue and cheek merit, there's something decidedly wrong here, especially for the layperson buying the clever book that promises parents and children hours of simple nostalgic fun. In an age of complex uncertainty, that simple and nostalgic is seductive, but in an age of complex growth, that simple and nostalgic is packaged short in vision and narrow in gender embodied scope.

Girls are no longer fated to grow up and become nurses or first ladies any more than boys are fated to grow up and become doctors or presidents. What girls and boys do become however does fall victim to the subjectivities that surround their gender and sexual identities and the corresponding boy/girl embodiment that goes along with this (Butler, 1997, Fautso- Sterling, 2000.) The *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books, while innocuous amusement on one hand, replicate societal structures that place this child amusement into real-life sites dictated by real-life rules. This arm to reality invented through text then has similar ground to the play kitchen or toy racing car produced and sold under girl/boy wrapping. But paper over plastic, the book in its textual explicitness is more consequential in casting binary sex and class divisions that, in a materialistic theoretical frame (Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997), produce and distribute gender capital unevenly. These ideological notions and structural systems of identity -- well ingrained in accepted measures of behavior -- merely dictate conventional, heteronormative, able-bodied, girl/boy stereotypes farmed under a shrewd cover of marketed advice (Peril, 2002). Boys lead, girls manipulate; boys stand out, girls fit in; everyone is thin and white and able-bodied, and everyone is reaching for this uniformed illusion of what is good and right in the world (Douglas, 2010; Zeisler, 2008). The *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books

effectually reproduce a gender retraction phenomenon that seals these sex, class, race, ability, and gender restricted boundaries.

### **A Best at Anything Revision**

Girl boy, pink blue, doll truck; an identity to product progression unequivocally sex and gender linked. This prefabricated practice of gendered production to consumption surrounds us. Materialist feminism is grounded in this commodity domain, and our western lives, as extension of patriarchal capitalism, are largely influenced by how and what we produce, and then, by the way in which we use these products to both match our bodies and propagate life (Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997). Regardless of theoretical orientation, at various levels we all participate in this production /consumption cycle, sustaining a capitalistic economy fueled by heteropatriarchal power. As textual recreation, the *How to be the at Best at Everything* (2007) books exemplify a product outcome, only in a gender retraction fashion, the production is a backward spin aimed at binary gender containment. Postmodern thinking fragments identity into a fluid performative (Butler, 1997), existentialist thinking permits the enduring possibility of becoming (de Beauvoir, 1989), and materialist thinking links the human condition with what, in a sexual division of labor, we collectively work to produce and nurture (Gimenez, 1979; Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997). All allow us to see the contextual ways in which we interface with or resist historico-political forces of sex and gender production. But in the end, the product itself -- whether it is a pink doll or a blue truck -- sticks, as does the pervasive media messages that sell it and the capitalistic systems and conventional social scripts that, in a boy/girl binary, inform its purpose and use (Douglas, 2010). How do we shift this gender inscribed production paradigm? And is shifting the production paradigm a materialist maneuver, a gender identity maneuver, or both?

For children who indeed are emerging, we can, on a product level, refashion the *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) gendered schism of “amazingly awesome skills” to impart to growing girls and boys. This partly demands an ideological shift using a postmodern feminist frame of reference (Butler, 1997). A sex-neutral version of *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) that challenges gender norming, racial bias, and conventional ability recasts the boy/girl die. Diversely depicted children could be taught how to paint fanciful faces or how to reattach a bicycle chain. The possibilities here can be as imaginary to concrete as variations in person and place. Breaking the gender mold does not preclude boys learning how to crack a bat or girls learning how to braid hair; rather, it widens the lens in how children see and invent their own identities, and as subjects who can be anything, how they create their future selves in the world around them (Butler, 1997; Warnke, 2011). The *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books do splinter the binary ever so slightly, engineering girl wilderness campers and boy cart-wheelers, but the reach lies in having to search for these text-bites as isolated exceptions buried behind content that is decisively divided by age- old models of white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual, girl/boy identity. In an open subject frame, a “kid’s” activity book that overlays girls, boys, and those children who fall in between this sex-typed binary, would permit masculinity and femininity to be enacted absent of embodied presumptions, and it would extend a welcoming platform for any child emerging outside of and/or questioning expected girl/boy norms (Butler, 1997). But in a product to ideology schematic, are these fluid fixes the very things that the girl/boy *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books aim to suppress?

As manufactured realism, the *How to be the Best at Everything* (2007) books keep girls in embodied girl spaces that are, by default, under and socialized to boys, and similarly, they keep boys in embodied boy spaces that are, by default, over and superior to girls (Richards, 2003).



This by-design semblance is an effect of an age-old gendered narrative grounded as ideologically and methodically pervasive (Douglas, 2010; Warnke 2011). Imbedded in this pervasiveness is a power system that values and rewards masculine strength ascribed to boys, devalues feminine virtues ascribed to girls, and subverts those more ambiguous gender attributes scattered across a widely constructed identity spectrum (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Valenti. 2009). These binary sex/gender constructs privilege power systems and problematize real-life. For example, conservative think tanks that closet everything but heterosexuality, in a tacit but conspicuous polemic, demonize and erase gender deviation. Domesticity, although shifting slightly in distribution of work, remains a women- relegated site of unpaid labor (Delphy, 1984; Jaggar, 1983). And those who rationalize sex-work as a normalized choice, when in fact, it persists as materialist exploitation, further inscribe a male-centered, market driven gender retraction formula (Dines, 2010). Fragmenting the gender binary does not mean that we conflate girls and boys and expect them to experience their worlds seamlessly, but emerging and acquiring divergent sex and gender preferences is poles apart from proscribing a girl/boy hierarchical division that predetermines systematic entitlements constructed on the body (Bordo, 1999; Butler, 1997; Orbach, 2009). We cannot presume to feminize girls and masculinize boys in ways that package and produce rigid sex and gender categories which merely enable the social construction of a heteropatriarchal, materialist system of identity. On this account, we turn a top-heavy, male favored materialist wheel that squashes the open and uninhibited slate that is childhood itself.

In circling back to the production identity question, disrupting this gender constructed paradigm is a twofold exercise which mutually engages both materialist and identity construction. The ideological pivot rests on what we conceptualize as desirable behavior, which

then permits media messages and socially scripted identity offshoots to sanction this vocabulary. Re-spinning this capitalistic cycle of gender production is as cumbersome as uprooting patriarchy itself, since each are deeply entrenched in the historical to contemporary motion of life (Johnson, 2001). But recognizing this hegemonic landscape and its inherent white, able, elite, sex-typed binary marks the spaces where we can begin to color outside the lines. On this bend, we can transgress the universal experience as gendered male and the emotional and creative agency gendered female, and instead, intentionalize spaces where all children can imagine themselves in and around this span. Complex technologies inundate us with media infused messages that modernize a majority culture informed by narrow gender rules resurrected under the pure and perfect of a faulty yesteryear (Jhally, 2011; McRobbie 2009). We can watch *Ozzie and Harriett* reruns (Weisblat, 2010), remember *Dick and Jane* stories (Gray and Arbuthnot, 1946) , and even cringe at *I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl* (Darrow, 1970) graphic, but we don't want to revert back to these sexist media relics from days passed. This gender retraction pull is not all that "daring" but it is unequivocally "dangerous." On book titles alone, "Dangerous" connotes bad-boys and "Daring" connotes girl-provocation, saturating consumers with a divisive boy as macho girl as tease rhetoric before we even open a binding. This market-sanctioned identity narrative sits on bookstore shelves down the street and around the globe, prominently staging the very patriarchal, sex-typed, pigeonholed gender scripts that -- whether read theoretically or tongue in cheek -- write the body myopically.

*The Best at Everything* (2007) series prompts a timely reminder that we must recraft the limits of boy/girls attributes in ways that liberate opportunities for children to become and in ways that galvanize person and place equity measures. In a gender progression versus retraction mode, let's throw 2011 didactic gendering in with our 1960s burned bras. Then, in child-play

and real life, let's really commit to enable all children to freely invent their own "*I can be anything*" identities.

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